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SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN ELECTION UPDATE: FIVE DAYS OUT

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Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
Reason 1.4(d)

11. (C) Summary. President Chavez continues to travel widely in Venezuela and open major public works projects during the final days of campaigning. Opposition candidate Manuel Rosales met November 27 with members of the European Union's Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) and publicly urged the CNE to address concerns about the government obstructing his campaign's poll-watching efforts. The Ambassador met November 28 with Caracas-based EU Ambassadors who agreed that the EU EOM should exchange views with post's informal observers to the extent possible. OAS Secretary General Insulza reportedly told a Madrid press conference November 27 that the Venezuelan opposition has been given "much more space to participate than people acknowledge." Citing widespread public mistrust in the electoral process, Venezuelan Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino is publicly urging the National Electoral Council (CNE) to count all the printed receipts of electronic votes rather than audit just 54 percent of receipts, as planned. End Summary.

Rosales Campaign

12. (C) Opposition candidate Manuel Rosales will hold his trademark "Avalanche" rally in Puerto La Cruz, Anzoategui State in eastern Venezuela today, November 28. Some senior advisors to Rosales concede that the Zulia governor continues to trail Chavez, but still hold out hope for an eleventh hour electoral upset. Other Rosales supporters remain convinced Rosales is actually ahead. Rosales reportedly told one advisor that he has both "a box of handkerchiefs and a box of fireworks" ready for election day. Rosales' election monitoring team conducted its first test of its election monitoring systems with campaign poll-watchers in the field. The campaign is still only able to deploy trained witnesses to about two-thirds of the over 33,000 voting tables, according to a Rosales' electoral advisor.

Chavez Campaign

13. (SBU) President Chavez is scheduled to campaign November 28 in the eastern state of Delta Amacura, a state with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants. On November 27, Chavez inaugurated

the Venirauto assembly plant, a joint venture between Iranian company Aidco and Venezuelan state-owned company, VenInsa. Chavez claimed the plant will produce 10,000 low-cost vehicles annually. The inauguration is a bit early; the plant is scheduled to be ready by mid-2007 at the earliest.

Observers

¶4. (U) Rosales met November 27 with members of the European Union's Election Observation Mission (EU EOM). Rosales said he told the EU EOM that their evaluation of the presidential election should take into consideration the entire campaign, particularly the government's "abuses of power," and not just the voting on election day. He also publicly urged the CNE to correct problems with the issuance of credentials to his campaign poll-watchers, as well as avoid further last-minute changes to the randomly-selected polling officials. After the meeting, Rosales denied the allegation of Accion Democratica President Victor Bolivar that the CNE is steering the audit of voting machines to pre-selected machines.

¶5. (C) Ambassador met with local EU Ambassadors to discuss pre and post election scenarios. The EU Ambassadors expressed confidence that the military would not interfere with the voting process and predicted Chavez would almost certainly win. They also agreed that the EU and OAS missions should coordinate as during last year's legislative elections. The EU Ambassadors also pledged that EU mission members, wherever and whenever possible, should exchange views with post's informal observers on election day.

¶6. (U) During a press conference in Madrid, OAS Secretary General Insulza praised the competitiveness of the presidential campaign and said the "opposition has been given much more space to participate than people acknowledge." As further proof of the freedom of expression, Insulza noted the

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November 25 Rosales march "would have been more difficult if there was as much fear in Venezuela as is claimed." Insulza hoped the EOM would be able to say by December 6 that the election was free and fair. Separately, OAS EOM leader Juan Fischer met with member of the Joint Chiefs (CUFAN) General Guido Querales November 27 to discuss the logistics of "Plan Republica," the military's support program for the elections, and to ensure that the military orders conformed to their constitutional duties.

CNE/BRV Actions

¶7. (U) CNE will set up a situation center December 1 to provide assistance to voting stations that experience last minute problems, such as a lack of materials or poll workers, or problems with machines. Separately, CNE director Sandra Oblitas announced that voters who fail to deposit their voting receipts in the boxes on election day could be accused of violating electoral law. She also clarified that the president of each electoral table is responsible for overseeing the hot audit of voting receipts, which should be public.

¶8. (SBU) CNE President Tibisay Lucena said November 23 that it will not permit any type of survey or exit poll by individuals or organizations in voting centers on election day. Rosales' electoral advisors told poloff November 24 that they were seeking clarification of that statement. The Rosales campaign still plans to do exit polls outside voting centers, and never had any intention of trying to enter polling sites to do exit surveys. At his November 26 mass rally in Caracas, President Chavez said his campaign would also conduct exit polls. He also said he expected the opposition to publicize skewed exit poll returns on election

day prematurely as part of a "plan" to allege government fraud.

¶9. (SBU) The Ministry of Education has ordered all schools to be closed November 30 to December 4. Many schools will serve as voting stations on December 3, but the decree applies to all schools. Escuela Campo Alegre, which almost all Embassy children attend, is not a polling place, but will be closed per the Ministry of Education decree. According to CNE regulations, all campaigning must end by 6:00 a.m. on Friday, December 1 -- 48 hours before voting begins.

Other Developments

¶10. (SBU) The Catholic Church: Venezuelan Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino publicly urged the CNE November 27 to count all the printed receipts of votes registered electronically to ensure greater public confidence in the electoral results. Current CNE audit procedures require opening -- at random -- only some of the electoral boxes according to a prescribed formula. For example, at polling stations with two election tables, one box will be opened; where there are three to five tables, two will be opened, and where there are six to eight, three will be opened. The end result is that a little over 54 percent of all printed receipts will be scrutinized in the audits. Cardinal Urosa also rejected efforts to create a climate of "pre-violence" before the election. He urged the eventual winner to govern with a "democratic attitude, with respect for others and without arrogance." Urosa repeated his concerns and presented the Episcopal Conference's declaration to OAS EOM leader Fischer during their November 28 meeting.

¶11. (SBU) Baseball and Politics: The Venezuelan professional baseball league has moved its all-star game, originally scheduled for November 28, to December 11. According to the Vice President of the Venezuelan Players' Association, the league was unable to schedule the game at University Stadium in Caracas on November 28. However, government officials offered the field at the Fuerte Tiuna military installation in Caracas as an alternative on the same date, with the idea that President Chavez would attend the event. After players objected to the politicization of the all-star game right before the December 3 election, the league decided to schedule the all-star game December 11 at University Stadium.

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